

5. CONCLUSIONS

Overview and “Iceberg” Theory

The results of the National Elder Abuse Incidence Study (NEAIS) confirm the validity of the “iceberg” theory of elder abuse that has been accepted in the aging research community for 20 years or more. According to this theory, official reporting sources (e.g., Adult Protective Services), receive reports about the most visible types of abuse and neglect, but a large number of other incidents are unidentified and unreported. Community sentinels, solicited by the study for information on their professional encounters with elderly clients and contacts, observed such abuse and neglect and learned of incidents that are less obvious and that would not be reported to an official agency.

The best national estimate is that a total of 449,924 elderly persons, aged 60 and over, experienced abuse and/or neglect in domestic settings in 1996. Of this total, 70,942 (16 percent) were reported to and substantiated by APS agencies, but the remaining 378,982 (84 percent) were not reported to APS. From these figures, one can conclude that over five times as many new incidents of abuse and neglect were unreported than those that were reported to and substantiated by APS agencies in 1996.¹

The best national estimate is that a total of 551,011 elderly persons, aged 60 and over, experienced abuse, neglect, and/or self-neglect in domestic settings in 1996. Of this total, 115,110 (21 percent) were reported to and substantiated by APS agencies, with the remaining 435,901 (79 percent) not being reported to APS agencies. One can conclude from these figures that almost four times as many new incidents of elder abuse, neglect, and/or self-neglect were unreported than those that were reported to and substantiated by APS agencies in 1996.²

¹ The standard error suggests that nationwide as many as 688,948 elders or as few as 210,900 elders could have been victims of abuse and/or neglect in domestic settings in 1996.

² The standard error suggests that nationwide as many as 787,027 elders or as few as 314,995 elders could have been abused, neglected, and/or self-neglecting in domestic settings in 1996.

These estimates of the incidence of abuse and neglect (i.e., new incidents) during 1996 from the NEAIS are lower than other previous estimates. However, it is difficult to compare results across these various studies directly because of significant differences in research objectives, designs and methodologies. Some studies have examined the prevalence of elder abuse (i.e., the total number of cases of abuse in a given population at a designated time), while others have explored the incidence (i.e., the number of new cases of abuse occurring over a specified period of time). Prevalence studies, by their very definition, produce larger estimates. The geographic coverage of studies has differed, with some studies extrapolating to larger areas on the basis of selected, but non-random smaller areas. Also, definitions of abuse and neglect and research time frames vary considerably across studies, making direct comparison impossible.

It is also important to acknowledge that there has been a very substantial increase in the number of official APS elder abuse and neglect reports over the past ten years. In 1986, a total of 117,000 reports (not unduplicated elderly) were received by APS agencies in the states for elders age 60 and over. Ten years later in 1996, a total of 293,000 reports (not unduplicated elderly) were received by these APS agencies throughout the country for this age group (Tatara and Kuzmeskus, 1997). This is an increase of 150 percent over this ten-year period. The elderly population, of course, also increased during this time period, and if the rate of reporting to APS agencies had simply remained the same the number of reports would have increased just because there was a larger elderly cohort that potentially might be abused or neglected. The elderly population 60 years old and over did increase by 10 percent between 1986 and 1996, from 38.9 to 43.9 million. (These numbers are for all elders, including those in institutional settings.)

Clearly, however, the increase in the total number of elder persons in the country explains very little of the phenomenal increase in official APS reporting. Had APS reports simply grown in the same proportion as the increase in the size of the elder population itself between 1986 and 1996 we could expect 128,700 reports, not 293,000. Even accounting for population growth, the number of APS reports increased by 128 percent in these ten years. In short, by 1996 a much larger proportion of new incidents of domestic elder abuse and neglect was reported to official APS agencies than was reported in 1986. Elder abuse and neglect were not as hidden and under-reported to APS as they were earlier.

This study is the first to attempt to estimate the number of elders abused or neglected during a particular year in the United States, whether officially reported to Adult

Protective Services agencies or unreported and perhaps largely unnoticed or ignored by the general population. APS agencies keep data on the total number of cases that they accept for investigation each year, but generally they count each report they receive as a separate incident. Often, the same event is reported more than once, but these duplicate cases are not removed from the counts. Consequently, APS totals overestimate the number of individuals who are reported to them as abused or neglected each year. The NEAIS estimates provide data on unduplicated numbers of abused, neglected, and self-neglecting elders recognized by these official sources.

At the same time, as described in the report, most incidents are never reported to APS, probably for many different reasons, some of which were mentioned to the field research staff during the course of the study. Some NEAIS sentinels claimed they have attempted to report cases to APS and, if appropriate actions are not taken, they do not provide additional reports. Some of this problem is inherent in the APS process itself because reporters generally are not apprised of the outcome of investigations of abuse. Other NEAIS sentinels noted that they often encounter situations where elderly persons do not want incidents reported because relatives might be implicated who are their only source of support or because they might risk abandonment or reprisals.

Overall, elder abuse is even more difficult to detect than child abuse, since the social isolation of some elderly persons may increase both the risk of maltreatment itself and the difficulty of identifying that maltreatment. Approximately a quarter of elders live alone, and many others interact primarily with family members and see very few outsiders. Children, in contrast, never live alone and, furthermore, are required by law to attend school from age 5 until 16. Consequently, by kindergarten, children come into contact with at least one institution outside the home almost daily during much of the year for most of their childhood. Although community sentinels are valuable sources of information about abuse and neglect of elders, neither they nor other reporting sources can conclusively account for victims of domestic abuse and neglect who do not leave their homes and who rarely come in contact with others. Consequently, the NEAIS undoubtedly undercounts abuse, neglect, and self-neglect among isolated elderly people in domestic settings.

Figure 5.1 depicts the impact of the NEAIS findings on the “iceberg” theory of elder abuse. The NEAIS data represent the measurement, or mapping, of a large and previously unknown segment of the elder abuse iceberg under the water line. A significant, submerged area

of previously unidentified and unreported elder abuse has been exposed and estimated. NEAIS has found that there were over five times as many new incidents of elder abuse and neglect previously unidentified and unreported as those that were reported to and substantiated by APS. NEAIS researchers also acknowledge that the sentinel methodology (or any methodology) cannot identify and report on all hidden domestic abuse and neglect, and that a submerged core of abuse and neglect remains unidentified, unreported, and inestimable at this time. The continued “mapping” of this final terrain represents a challenge for future research on elder abuse.

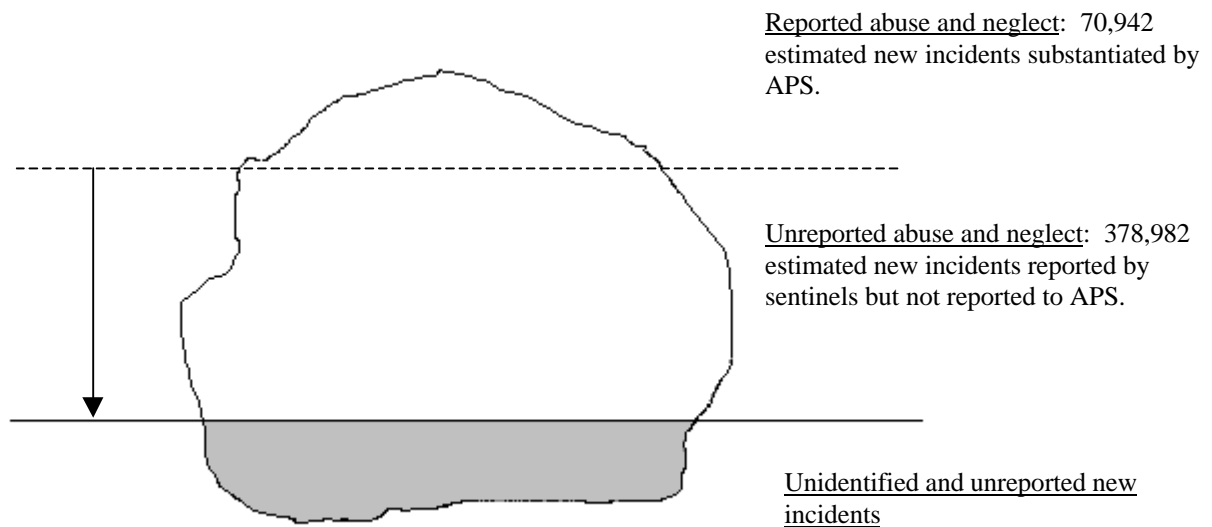


Figure 5-1. Iceberg theory showing NEAIS identified unreported abuse and neglect, excluding self-neglect

Summary of Findings

Victims of Abuse, Neglect, and Self-Neglect

Victims reported to APS resemble the characteristics of victims identified by sentinel agencies, for many categories of abuse and neglect. Women are disproportionately represented as victims, according to reports from both APS and sentinel sources. In APS reports, women represent from 60 percent to 76 percent of those subjected to all forms of abuse and neglect except abandonment, even though, overall, women represent only 58 percent of the elderly population (over 60 years of age). In reports received exclusively from sentinels, from 67 percent to 92 percent of those reported as abused were women, depending on the type of abuse.

The greatest disparity between men and women was in reported rates of emotional or psychological abuse, according to APS data. Three-fourths of those subjected to this form of abuse were women rather than men. According to sentinel reports, the greatest disparity between men and women was in the category of financial abuse, in which 92 percent of the victims were women.

A substantial proportion of the victims of neglect was the oldest old (age 80 and over), according to both APS and sentinel reports. APS reports showed that 52 percent of neglect victims were over age 80. Sentinels found 60 percent in this oldest age range. APS reports also suggest that this older category was disproportionately subjected to physical abuse, emotional abuse, and financial exploitation. Overall, our oldest elders are abused and neglected at two to three times their proportion of the elderly population.

Sentinel data show that of those subjected to any form of abuse, fewer than 10 percent were minorities (including Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Pacific Islanders and others). On the other hand, higher proportions of victims of most forms of abuse and neglect reported to APS agencies were Black, ranging from 9 percent for physical abuse, the lowest, to 17 percent for neglect. Only small proportions of Hispanics and other minorities are represented in most categories of abuse reported to APS, generally less than 3 percent altogether. These low proportions for these other minorities are supported by the sentinel data. Further research is needed to ascertain whether low rates for Hispanics in particular are due to lower rates of reporting and detection of abuse and neglect, perhaps because of language barriers, or are due to lower rates of actual abuse in these communities.

Elderly self-neglect also is a serious problem, with about 139,000 new unduplicated reports in 1996. (Some of those described as self-neglecting were also subjected to other forms of abuse.) Approximately two thirds of self-neglecting elders reported to APS were women. In addition, 45 percent of them were over the age of 80. Most victims of self-neglect are unable to care for themselves and/or are confused; many are depressed. This is a difficult and troubling finding, which warrants attention as well as further research.

Perpetrators of Abuse and neglect

Across all categories of abuse and neglect, the distribution of perpetrators by gender is almost equal, according to reports received by APS. However, this overall equity is due to the preponderance of neglect as a category and the somewhat greater frequency of neglect perpetrated by women (52 percent versus 48 percent by men). For all other categories of abuse reported to APS, men outnumbered women as perpetrators by at least 3 to 2. Among reports by sentinels, which are not broken down by type of abuse because the numbers are too small, male perpetrators outnumbered female perpetrators by 1.8 to 1. This preponderance of abuse by men is significant both in reports obtained from APS and in sentinel data.

According to reports received by APS and data supplied by sentinels, most perpetrators were younger than their victims. According to information supplied by APS, 65 percent of total perpetrators were under age 60; close to the same percentage of perpetrators identified by sentinels were under age 60. Of course, even perpetrators who are older than 60 may still be younger than the persons they abuse are. Among reports to APS, the relative “youth” of perpetrators of financial abuse is particularly striking compared to other types of abuse, with 45 percent being 40 or younger and another 40 percent being 41–59 years old.

Relatives or spouses of the victims commit most domestic elder abuse according to reports supplied both by APS and sentinels. Approximately 90 percent of alleged abusers, according to both types of sources, were related to victims. APS data suggest that adult children are the largest category of abusers, across all forms of abuse, with proportions ranging from 43 percent for cases of neglect to nearly 80 percent for abandonment, although there were relatively few reported instances of abandonment. Adult children also account for the largest category of alleged abusers in sentinel reports (39 percent). Since family members are frequently the primary caregivers for elderly relatives in domestic settings, this finding that family members are the primary perpetrators of elderly abuse is not surprising.

Limitations of NEAIS Research

The NEAIS study design had some limitations that prevented it from making an estimate of all new incidents of elder abuse and neglect in 1996. First, the sentinel approach tends to cause a certain amount of “undercount” in the detection of domestic elder abuse because there are no community institutions in which all elders regularly assemble and from which

sentinels can be chosen and elders observed. In the case of child abuse research, on the other hand, schools serve as such a community institution from which primary sentinels are selected. The NEAIS was aware of this inherent limitation in the sentinel research design and tried to ameliorate this challenge by assigning as many sentinels as appropriate from the four large categories of professionals most regularly in contact with elderly people.

A second and related inherent limitation of the sentinel research design is that sentinels cannot observe and report abuse and neglect of elders that are isolated or do not have any (or very limited) contact with any community organizations. The sentinel method is most effective when well-trained sentinel reporters (which NEAIS's were) have opportunities to observe the same elders over a reasonable period of time. If there is minimal contact between the elderly person and sentinels, the opportunities for observing the signs and symptoms of abuse and neglect are lessened.

Finally, limitations in resources available to the NEAIS may have limited the total count of elders and the precision of the results. With more resources, it would have been possible to sample a larger number of study counties and to follow events in each of them for a longer time period. Estimates of child abuse and neglect for the third federally funded incidence study, for example, were obtained in 40 primary sampling units (i.e., counties) using more than 3,000 sentinels over a three-month period, rather than in NEAIS's 20 sampling units, with 1,200 sentinels in two months. One of the effects of the smaller number of counties, sentinels, and months of reporting was the smaller number of total sentinel reports and the resulting relatively large standard errors and wide confidence bands used in calculating the incidence estimates. With smaller standard errors, the NEAIS findings could be more definitive, or precise.

Implications of NEAIS Findings

The findings of the NEAIS raise a number of important issues for policy development, practice, and training in addressing the problems of elder abuse, neglect, and self-neglect. Study findings can provide a basis for designing new and enlightened public policies and practices, which are programmatically responsible, fiscally sound, and compassionate. This report also presents data to support practitioners, caregivers, social researchers and others in identifying new approaches to reduce and prevent abuse, neglect, exploitation, and self-neglect of

the elderly. Because states and localities historically have had responsibility for elder abuse reporting, investigation, intervention, and services, most of the following implications are for state and local governments:

- An important target for policy planners is the abuse and neglect among the oldest elders, which becomes ever more urgent since those aged 85 and over are the most rapidly growing elderly age group.
- Elderly persons who are unable to care for themselves, and/or are mentally confused and depressed are especially vulnerable to abuse and neglect as well as self-neglect. Perhaps our local community organizations and corporations can be mobilized to recognize such potential problems and provide support (e.g., by mobilizing neighborhood programs; by educating and sensitizing employees about elder abuse and neglect).
- Given the large number of incidents of abuse and neglect that are unidentified and unreported, service providers, caregivers, and all citizens who relate to elderly people need to be alerted to the problem of abuse and neglect, taught to recognize it, and encouraged to report suspected abuse.
- Maintain a comprehensive system of services to respond to reports of elder abuse and to provide follow-up services to elder abuse victims.
- Physicians and health care workers may be especially well placed to detect instances of abuse, neglect, and self-neglect given that even the most isolated elderly persons come in contact with the health care system at some point. The education of physicians, nurses, and other health care workers should be focused on how to recognize and report signs and symptoms of elder abuse, neglect, and self-neglect and where to refer victims for other human and support services.
- Increased standardization of state definitions and general reporting procedures for elder abuse and neglect would allow the more meaningful and expedited collection and analysis of data about elder abuse, including monitoring national trends in incidence over time.
- The Western region of the country reported the largest number of reports to APS of any of the regions. With approximately 25 percent of the U.S. population, the Western region was the source of 40 percent of the reports. Additionally, almost 60 percent of the Western region reports were substantiated, in contrast to an overall substantiation rate of 49 percent. More detailed study of these Western states may provide information on promising policies and practices for identifying and reporting abuse that can be replicated elsewhere in the country.

Future Research Questions and Issues

The findings of the NEAIS raise a number of questions and issues for researchers and service providers to think about in addressing the problems of elder abuse, neglect, and self-neglect. Clearly some of these complex issues will require additional research:

- The confluence of a high proportion of adult children, spouses, and particularly parents being perpetrators, along with the high proportion of perpetrators being 80 and over, suggests that the following may be important areas for further study:
 - the relationship between abusive family members and caregiving responsibilities;
 - the relationship between abusive spouses and parents and their caregiving responsibilities, particularly for neglect; and
 - the relationship between 80+ year old perpetrators and caregiving responsibilities.
- Are there characteristics of the perpetrators, aged 60 and over, that aging service providers could affect by reaching out and providing services so that abuse committed by perpetrators aged 60+ is reduced?
- Are there characteristics of the caregiving relationships among younger family members who financially exploit their older relatives that could be affected by service interventions for the perpetrators? What are those interventions? Are there services or education for persons aged 60+ that would help them from becoming victims of financial abuse, particularly by younger family members?
- What is the economic condition of victims of abuse and neglect compared with elders overall?
- In-home service providers reported all substantiated sexual abuse cases. Why is this so? What do they know/see that other reporters do not? How can we capitalize on their knowledge?
- Why are black elders more likely to be self-neglecters (18 percent of the substantiated APS reports compared to being 8 percent of the elder population)?
- Why do sentinels recognize abuse among women at a much higher rate than is reflected among APS reports? Do we need to train people better to recognize and detect abuse among men?
- Why do sentinels not see more self-neglect cases than are reported to APS agencies, as sentinels do for abuse and neglect?
- How can employees of banks be educated and encouraged to identify and report incidents of financial exploitation that may come to their attention while serving elderly customers? Although the NEAIS was not very successful in obtaining reports from bank sentinels, banks are in a good position to observe financial abuse and concerted attention should be given to how to better involve them in future research on elder abuse incidence. States and communities with particularly strong bank reporting of financial exploitation (e.g., Massachusetts and San Diego) may provide promising practices for such larger replication.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the NEAIS has documented the existence of a previously unidentified and unreported stratum of elder abuse and neglect, thus confirming and advancing our understanding of the “iceberg” theory of elder abuse. NEAIS estimates that for every abused and neglected elder reported to and substantiated by APS, there are over five additional abused and neglected elders that are not reported. NEAIS also acknowledges that it did not measure all unreported abuse and neglect. Our collective challenge — as policy makers, service providers, advocates, researchers, and society as a whole, is to utilize this information to better the lives of our elder citizens.

